

"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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Ministering to the Dispossessed in Rural Communities*

By Martin Schroeder

The fact that "the poor have the Gospel preached to them" was once used as climactic proof that a certain mission was divine. Can the Christian ministry today verify their divine authority by the same token?

Scrutinizing our attitude toward the poor in our own land must wring out a confession that our Lord's presence is not revealed sufficiently through passionately supplying the dispossessed and other underprivileged with the Gospel that our Lord gave us for that very purpose. Particularly is this revealingly true among our rural people who have been exposed during the last decade or two to cumulative privations. Too many of them have suffered the loss of their land, their work, their home and their church. Now they are on the road seeking work and finding none, except on relief or in uncertain employment. This being the case, the church has parted company with them. Their misery and spiritual homelessness is not a proportionately important item in missionary programs. The old system of linking preaching the Gospel and passing the hat, in one form or another, has been too well established among maturer denominations to think now under new conditions of preaching to these Americans for less than cash on delivery. During the period of America's expansion the preacher went with the pioneers and the church was the first institution, along with the home, in every new frontier. Though a new migratory wave is now under way, this time the preachers are keeping their distance, partly because there is no one to send them. We are not speaking of the exceptions.

Referring to these newly made homeless farmers, a recent writer in a denominational weekly let himself go to describe certain migrants as pests and beyond the pale of Christian obligation, though in the one camp which he visited "more than twenty men were found who had been officers in Christian churches." By and large, his impression of the restless farm laborers is, "They were born in filth, and always lived in filth." His section of the country, presumably including the church in which he is pastor, "doesn't care to waste its time and exhaust its patience in casting its pearls before swine." By what we know has been done for the unfortunate, landless farmer, this attitude may be called typical. It is not hard to prove, if proof were asked for, that conventional Protestant Christianity is chiefly a middle class social institution, many of whose ministers are mostly interested in clean work, unwilling to expose themselves to the smell of a haunted humanity precariously

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existing in rural slums. Under these circumstances, you will agree, the Gospel has a hard time to reach these poor.

II

To open the hearts in behalf of the dispossessed in rural communities in particular, it will be necessary to have a sympathetic understanding of rural religious needs in general, on the basis of which emerging problems can then be approached. A rough classification of rural work gives us three groups of churches. There are first those which by virtue of location, solid membership and permanent pastoral care know of the rural problems only by what they read in the papers. At the other end of the scale are the churches who by force of location, dispersed membership and sporadic pastoral care are in a state of suspended animation; they cannot live and they will not die. In between the two extremes are those who try to maintain the status quo of the neighborhood church, knowing almost for certain that they are fighting a losing battle, unless some one will rise and stand by them. The church at large tries in many places, with the pastor usually carrying the heavy end of the cross. But of this kind there are not enough.

Dr. T. F. Gullixson, President of Luther Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, guided by first-hand observation, estimates that a large number of Lutheran rural churches have been depleted by 15 to 50 per cent of their membership owing to migration and change of land-ownership. The support for these weakened churches has to find its foundation primarily in the attitude of the ministry, the perception of missionary obligations on the part of the church's leadership, and the temper of church colleges and theological schools who have to interpret Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Though social, economic and cultural changes, affecting organized religion, are taking place relentlessly, the church has been slow in recognizing these conditions. In her serving capacity she has not followed the farmer constituency down to the ever lower levels of his socio-economic existence. When his purse gave out to pay for the preaching, well--there was no more preaching for him and the key in the church door was turned for the last time. That is all there was to it. This is happening to a thousand rural churches every year, so the latest figures disclose. The practice affects both the traditionally poor as well as those for whom poverty is a new experience, brought on through little or no fault of their own.

Now what is the result of a church's attitude which shows little affection for those who are under pressure of either natural calamity or economic disaster? To thousands of communities troubled that way the church is virtually saying, "We have no money for you; we concentrate on the cities." Authentic cases abound. But this is not a question of money at all. We have money for troubled farmers in China and the needy elsewhere. We have money for troubled farmers in America if the facts were but known. This is a question of men, sufficiently impassioned by the crying need and willing to do the work. The money will then follow.

The burden of responsibility consequently must rest chiefly with the sources of inspiration, which next to the pitiful conditions themselves, must come from our Christian schools of higher education. There is no doubt but that they are eager to provide the vital elements for useful lives. Seven

years ago a group of Lutheran educators ventured into the task of reorientation and reconstruction. Their report, entitled Trends and Issues Affecting Lutheran Higher Education; established two principles, namely: "The educational program must grow out of the life, needs, tasks, opportunities of our faith in society today, and it must lead to understanding." Such principles must guide our schools in preparing the minister to the dispossessed in rural communities.

III

The fact that a number of state agricultural colleges have introduced courses into their curriculum which at least one of them describes outright as "pre-theological" for such who plan to enter the rural ministry, apart from extension courses and summer schools for those who are already on the field, is evidence enough that a need has arisen which far too few Christian schools of higher learning have so far fully recognized.

In an enlightening article by Dr. Abdel Ross Wentz, President of Gettysburg Seminary, entitled "A New Strategy for Theological Education,"¹ it is stated:

".....there is a widespread feeling that we must find a better way to educate our ministers. Things are stirring in the world of organized ministerial training.....It is an insistent demand that the kind of training we give them be more adequate to the purpose of the Christian ministry and the requirements of our day....."

Applying now for our purpose here his thesis to the apparent fiasco of established communions in not promptly taking care of emergencies in rural communities, we find him saying:

"If our Protestant Christianity manifests no great dynamic it is because it has lost its religious vitality. It has become too dilute as religion. It must learn to divorce itself from the moral temper of its age. It must have the courage to set up and maintain a certain tension between the Christian religion and the civilization in which it functions."

Today's inability of the church to be right at home in the midst of a twisted and dwarfed agricultural life can rightly be traced back to the schools that have lost that "certain tension" with respect to conditions here under discussion. Not to recognize that loss of contact between rural life and Christian higher education would only add to the difficulty of using existing "opportunities of our faith in society today." It certainly would prove the absence of "long range statesmanlike generalship," as Dr. Wentz calls it.

Colleges and seminaries have a difficult time explaining their practice of drawing unceasingly upon the youth of country and smaller towns without making it a point to direct at least part of them back to the type of communities from which they came. The courses and temper of our schools urbanize the rural student to such an extent that any one of them returning to the soil that bore him is the exception. The schools' failure to keep

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their curriculum and spirit in tune with the needs of the times and the section they serve has resulted in almost killing the goose that laid the golden egg. At any rate, she is very sick. The drain upon the rural population available for church school support is nearly completed in certain parts of the country and the schools find it hard to adjust themselves to the new poverty that has overtaken their constituency.

Any farmer worth his salt knows that land will not yield fruit indefinitely unless some of it is returned to replenish the soil. It refuses to yield to robbery, but acts kindly in cooperation. The same holds true in regard to the population that lives on the land. You cannot draw forever their best youths away from the soil, train them for and turn them over to the cities, and expect civic and religious rural leadership to take care of itself. Through this oversight the church schools have aided and abetted a human erosion that has eaten into the foundations of American farm home life. The leadership that remained, mostly farmers who thought they ought to be bankers, has sold the farmer down the river. That is why so many are now homeless.

To be more explicit about this trend from country to city and the shortage of qualified men in the rural ministry for which colleges and seminaries are not entirely blameless, I will refer to the four volume report on The Education of American Ministers by Brown, May and Shuttleworth. Whence do preachers come and whither do they go? Out of 1726 ministers, which represents a cross-section of an annual crop, 3.8 per cent came from well-to-do homes; 64.8 per cent are the sons of skilled and unskilled laborers, farmers and small tradesman; and 31.4 per cent from the homes of the poor and very poor. Upon graduation 80 per cent of the seminary students will begin work in country churches. But, within ten years, three-fourths of them will have moved to town, very likely in accordance with ideals gathered while in school. One would think that among the 96.2 per cent of poor and middle-class ministerial timber, enough men would be found who are willing to cast their lot with the type of people and the soil from which they came. But this is not the case, according to that report.

In defense of the neglect of rural inspiration and studies in church schools, those who know say that theological training is so comprehensive that no special emphasis is needed upon any one phase. Of course, no other professional training is planned that way. They all have specialists. Some have defended their cool attitude toward rural work by simply claiming that students who come to them do not intend to enter the rural field at all. This is their privilege. If that is the case, no rural church should be opened to them for laboratory or other purposes before or after graduation. Too many graduates, as they leave the seminary, find themselves facing a country congregation, (presumably while waiting for the better call), without being prepared for the delicate and exacting task. Unfit and resentful, with their hearts in distant places, these men, instead of building the rural church and taking a live interest in harrassed farmer members, contribute greatly to the church's deficiency in such fields.

Dr. Mark Dawber must be correct when he claims in his Rebuilding Rural America that "rural people demand ministers who believe in rural life" and goes on to say, "most of the theological seminary graduates are prepared for an urban rather than a rural ministry. Those who do succeed (as rural

pastors) are doing so in spite of their seminary training rather than because of it."

IV

There is no use trying to pin the blame upon any one church or school. It is simply a condition which has been allowed to develop unchecked. We all have failed more or less to utilize the idealism and examples of men like Grundtvig and Oberlin, or emulate an Albert Schweitzer right here at home. Whatever a student's disposition, the minister he is to be will depend greatly upon the environment that shapes him. We are such creatures. A school's atmosphere has effects upon after-life we cannot deny. The way things are, that atmosphere has a decidedly urbanizing influence, adjusting the student to a middle-class complex. For this reason, the idea of serving that increasingly large class of dispossessed in rural communities on a professional basis cannot capture the imagination of youth.

For a sample we may turn to the Lutherans who, according to the above mentioned report by Brown, etc., "have maintained the highest educational standard among their ministers,.....only 3.6 per cent short of perfection." In twenty-one theological schools with over 1,500 students and faculties totaling 134, there are but three professors teaching specific rural life related courses, as shown in U. S. Department of Agriculture figures covering every form of secondary and graduate education. These are in the schools at Dubuque, Iowa; Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; and Rock Island, Illinois. Of the thirty-one colleges and junior colleges with over 900 teachers, belonging to the National Lutheran Educational Conference, fourteen, or less than one-half of these institutions, offer rural life subjects in the social sciences. This, in spite of the fact that the Lutheran Church is very rural, as much as 80 per cent in some sections with at least one district reporting as high as 92 per cent. What more needs to be said to show that in this particular aspect the educational program, by and large, is not "adequate to the purpose of the Christian ministry and the requirements of our day."

If atmosphere is an essential element in the making of an efficient rural ministry for rich and poor alike, what should be done? Dr. William Alfred Passavant, the inveterate missionary and founder of great Christian institutions, referring to the need of ministers for the frontier, said at the time of the westward expansion, "Education for the West must be education in the West." For the successful training of hardy missionaries he held that the environment, the atmosphere, was of prime importance. His principle holds true in regard to the country church in our day. The conventional church school offers little which might bring about in the student a passion for the land and its people. Education for the country, to paraphrase Dr. Passavant, should be education in the country, preparing the young man, (and this may apply to the woman he marries), for life in the parsonage of the open country and on the hillsides, as well as teaching him how to reach the farmer's heart. With such men the rural church will no longer be the pain it is now.

Stalling off approach to the solution of the problem will get us nowhere. The newer and smaller sects, with less tradition and history back of them, are preempting right now our claims upon the country by actually going to it and serving the dispossessed the best they know how. The older denomina-

tions might do well in taking a leaf or two from their book on effective evangelism.

V

Walt Whitman once wrote, "I am an acme of things accomplished, an encloser of things to be." Applied to society and the church in particular, his thought assumes evidence. We, the church, are an encloser of things to be. What shall they be? Will the teachers of future ministers share in the answer?

Three axioms must be kept in mind in formulating a new program in behalf of distressed rural communities, where you find the most prolific group in our population next to the Indian. (1) America's tomorrow will be controlled by them. They are the biological aristocrats. People who die do not rule. (2) The records of all history bear out that when a nation neglects the welfare of its rural population and assumes an "urban destiny," that nation destroys itself. (3) When organized religion fails to identify itself as the executioner of the revealed law and will of God, the Almighty has other means to accomplish his ends, as it is likewise shown in the records of mankind, including the Scriptures.

Dr. Walter Maier, of radio fame, speaking on Lutheran Day at the New York World's Fair, gave forceful expression in regard to what the church owes to the underprivileged, when he said:

"History demonstrates that whenever the churches are allied with wealth to the neglect of the everlasting poor, they have sealed their own doom and have often precipitated national upheaval. Some religious groups are.....losing their vital contact with bleeding and broken lives.....helping to prepare for a social revolution."

In training men for the ministry, such warning cannot pass unheeded. The picture seems gloomy. Nevertheless, it is incontrovertible reality. But even here, the silver lining is not missing. Dr. Gullixson sees it in this light:

"The church cannot afford to lose, in this modern urbanized civilization those Westerners who dare to be so much alone and under their silent stars may, like David watching his flocks, be drawn powerfully to God.....It has long been a feeling with me that this vast slope country, well shepherded, may yet become the Scotland of American Protestantism."

May such vision become the guiding star for many who are still in doubt as to their responsibility toward the dispossessed in rural communities. One way for the church to confirm her worth in this critical age is to be able to say to those who question her authority, "Behold, 'the poor have the Gospel preached to them.'"

Editor's note: Dr. Schroeder naturally refers to his own denomination in this paper. We are printing it, however, because of its general application to, and wider implications for, American Protestantism.